

Formulating a Strong Job Description

As an employer managing a fast-paced business, job descriptions may seem like a time drain. However, job descriptions are actually one of the most important written documents an employer can have when it comes to handling regulatory compliance, lawful termination, hiring, and many other employment decisions.

Accurate job descriptions are fundamental to legal compliance. Companies that do not have written job descriptions in place are at a much higher risk of lawsuits being brought against them by applicants and employees. Regulations being imposed on employers by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and various OSHA standards are forcing employers to be much more exact about job requirements and the process for making employment decisions.

BENEFITS OF JOB DESCRIPTIONS

- ▲ Serve as legal documentation that can be useful in the event an employee files a termination or discrimination lawsuit against the company.
- ▲ Function as a foundation for developing interview questions.
- ▲ Discourages employees from refusing to do something because “it is not my job.”
- ▲ Provide a basis for employee reviews, salary increases, setting goals, and growth paths.
- ▲ Help maximize dollars spent on employee compensation for the position by ensuring experience, and skills needed for the job, are detailed and matched to prospective applicants.

Below is a detailed guide from the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) on best practices for designing job descriptions to best protect a company while also providing employees and applicants with essential job data.

There are several steps to completing a job description. These steps include completing a job analysis, recording the basic purpose and functions of the job, and detailing necessary qualifications.

Step 1: Completing a Job Analysis

What is a job analysis? A job analysis is an investigative process that involves observing an individual who is actually doing a job, observing co-workers, interviewing the worker, and interviewing co-workers. Additional data collection might be achieved using task-centered questionnaires, checklists, and journal entries. A job analysis essentially

involves determining the job’s purpose and the structure of the job setting, including specifics about the work-site, workstation, and activities. Once completed, a job analysis will help determine what accommodations can assist a person with a disability in performing a job.

1. Purpose

- ▲ What are the reasons for the job’s existence? Document the particular contributions of the job to the organization’s overall mission.
- ▲ What are the job duties necessary for job performance? Usually less than ten job duties are essential activities necessary to the job.

2. Job Setting

- ▲ Work-site
 - What is the physical layout of the work-site?
 - What equipment is used in the work setting?
 - Where are the essential functions performed?
 - What conditions are required for task completion? Conditions include environmental (hot/cold, inside/outside, noise level, lighting, ventilation, etc.) and social (works with the public, works under deadlines, works alone, etc.).
 - Is the job accessible (parking, entrances, exits, doors)?
 - Does the job necessitate completing tasks in multiple, alternate, or off-site locations?
- ▲ Workstation
 - How is the workstation arranged?
 - How do workers obtain and discard equipment and materials?
 - How is the work organized?
- ▲ Activities
 - What is the required output level for the job?
 - What are the expected results?
 - What is the relationship between each task? If there is a task sequence or a task hierarchy, document this order.
 - What are the necessary physical and mental requirements needed to accomplish the job?
 - Is specific training necessary? Document what required experience, certificates, and education are necessary.

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- What are the safety and quality control measures in place? Document potential workplace hazards and the measures taken to eliminate them.
- What happens if a task is not performed appropriately?
- What level of responsibility is necessary?
- What happens if the end result is not achieved?
- Are there specified time frames for completing a task?

Step 2: Recording the Basics

Employers should develop job descriptions that clearly define the essential functions of every job before advertising the job or interviewing applicants. A job description should have clear, concise, non-technical language, and avoid unnecessary words. The job description should focus on words that have a single meaning with detailed explanations for words that may be interpreted differently. Each sentence should begin with an active verb and use the present tense. Examples of job functions should be provided. The desired outcome of the work should be described, rather than one method for accomplishing that outcome. For example, instead of “writes down notes during meetings” put “records notes during weekly meetings.” Writers should avoid using gender-specific language, jargon, technical language, proprietary names (Xerox), and ambiguity. Job functions should be qualified whenever possible and the desired outcome of the work should be described, rather than the method for accomplishing that outcome. For example, instead of saying, “she files folders” write that “the clerk files folders alphabetically based on category.” Employers should let individuals read their job descriptions, voice any concerns, and sign their descriptions. Job descriptions should be accurate. To ensure accuracy, combine the input of many managers and employees. Within the actual job description, an employer should include:

- ▲ Job title (job code number if applicable);
- ▲ Department or section of the job;
- ▲ Relationships to other jobs and the purpose of contact with outside agencies and personnel;
- ▲ A brief summary of job functions;
- ▲ Duties and responsibilities, estimated time spent on each (when using percentages, these should be allocated to equal 100%), frequency of activity, i.e., whether these are performed daily, weekly, or periodically;
- ▲ The quality and quantity of work expected from an individual holding the position;
- ▲ The repercussions of not performing each job function;
- ▲ Essential and marginal duties;

- ▲ Special working conditions such as shift, overtime, or as-needed work;
- ▲ Information on the accountability for results; and
- ▲ A statement that when duties and responsibilities change and develop, the job description will be reviewed and subject to changes of business necessity.

Note that the term “essential function” should be used in the job description. The job description should explicitly state the manner that an individual is to perform the job. For example, a description of a position that requires contact with the public should include not only that the job requires the handling of public inquiries, but also that the inquiries must be handled in a prompt and friendly manner. Employers should also describe regular attendance and timeliness as essential functions of any jobs that require regular and punctual employee presence. Job descriptions should be updated periodically to reflect the essential functions of altered positions or any other pertinent change (e.g., fewer employees to perform the duties, mechanization, job-sharing, etc.). All levels of management, from line supervisors to top management and human resources, should review job descriptions.

Step 3: Detailing Qualifications

When detailing qualifications on job descriptions, employers typically require certain knowledge, skills, aptitude, training, and previous experience. Employers should remember that these qualifications might be gained in a number of ways. For example, knowledge may be gained through education, training, or experience. In addition, other requirements, such as the possession of a driver’s license could be considered discriminatory. For example, it may be necessary to specify that an individual must be “available to attend evening meetings throughout the community” and “possess a driver’s license” but an employer should distinguish between need and convenience and consider any discriminatory effects. An employee with a disability may be able to attend a meeting via teleconference or access public transportation to attend the meeting on-site.

Step 4: Maintaining Consistency

Internal consistency is very important when developing an overall bank of organizational job descriptions. The employer may want to select specific formats, fonts, logos, and other elements to streamline and standardize the appearance of the documents. Consistent language, such as preferred action words and frequently used terms, can help create cohesiveness throughout. A bank of job descriptions can be instrumental in supporting the development of other organizational documents and standards as well. Descriptions may offer a framework for developing performance evaluations. In addition, the information gleaned may provide a common thread for developing employee resumes, policy manuals, annual reports, and organizational media.